



Organizing Services

To organize and activate community plans for dealing with stress, Extension specialists can focus on the following issues in their communities.

“Talk to individuals in the community about how the disaster has impacted their lives and how they feel about it.”

Segment the disaster-impacted population into identifiable sub-groups and direct outreach/stress-relieving programming to specific groups.

Priority audiences might include:

- Children (and their families)
- Elderly
- Farmers and Small Business Owners
- Exhausted Human Service Providers

Many of these groups may be targeted by specific agencies in your community. Find out who else might be working with these groups and try to figure out how your efforts can complement or supplement those efforts.

Identify Stress

It can be difficult to identify the nature of specific emotional stressors affecting disaster victims to determine new strategies and programming assistance.

Some ways to help you understand the source of stress in the community are:

- Listen to people in public meetings, social and civic events at the local level.
- Talk to individuals in the community about how the disaster has impacted their lives and how they feel about it.
- Read case stories on the disaster in the media.
- Consult local mental health professionals.
- Review disaster-related literature and case studies.

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Stress and Coping With Disaster: A Handbook Compiled Following the Midwest Flood of 1993 for Extension Professionals, compiled by Marty Baker and Ami O'Neill

- Conduct formal and informal interviews with people who walk in for services at food pantries, warehouses, clothing centers, etc.

One major counseling or support problem is identifying the specific knowledge base and devising the counseling group or community strategy that may best address the specific stressors. Disaster-related stress has specific manifestations.

“Identifying one stress theme at a time may help you sort out the multiple layers of emotions involved and will help you better formulate plans to help your community.”

Identifying one stress theme at a time may help you sort out the multiple layers of emotions involved and will help you better formulate plans to help your community. For example, many disaster victims may express feelings of insecurity, saying that they can not close the door of their own homes and "feel safe." Others might have pervasive feelings of confusion and apathy. Some people may feel betrayed by trusted public officials. Some families may even be wrestling with issues of abandonment and separation. Sometimes elderly parents express frustration when their children refuse to visit the flooded town or ancestral home because "they want to remember it like it was."

Find out what agencies are helping people cope with disaster-related stress in your area.

Try to find out what civic groups, government officials, churches and other agencies are planning to do to assist with disaster recovery. In the midwest floods of 1993, many agencies working in the areas affected by the disaster were unaware of what the other agencies were doing. As a result, the assistance provided to families was haphazard at best. Communication channels need to be improved between community agencies to avoid redundancy and to help organize cooperative projects.